

Brookings Institution preview of the Democratic Congress: Snapshot of an establishment in crisis

Barry Grey in Washington DC
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World Socialist Web Site *editorial board member*
Barry Grey reports from the capital on the incoming Democratic Congress.

The Brookings Institution, the Democratic-leaning think tank that has long been a mainstay of the Washington establishment, held a panel discussion Wednesday on the subject “The First 100 Hours: A Preview of the New Congress and its Agenda.”

The forum was held on the eve of Thursday’s opening of the 110th Congress. Its title referred to the much ballyhooed “100 Hours” legislative agenda conjured up by incoming Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to launch the return of the Democrats to control over both the House of Representatives and the Senate for the first time in 12 years.

To any informed student of American political history, there is something derisory about the very title chosen by Pelosi and company to announce the Democrats’ return to power in Congress. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had his famous “100 Days” package of social and economic measures at the start of his first term in 1933—in the depths of the Great Depression.

Roosevelt’s measures—pragmatic and partial as they were—nevertheless marked a significant and, in American terms, dramatic departure from the rigidly laissez faire economic policies of preceding administrations. They contained a genuine element of social reform and government intervention into the previously inviolate domain of corporate affairs. With his “100 Days,” the head of state of the industrial powerhouse of the world announced his intention to save American capitalism from the prospect of social revolution—with or without the approval of leading corporate moguls.

As the absurdly foreshortened “100 Hours” of Pelosi suggests, there is no similar element of innovation or popular reform in the package cobbled together by FDR’s present-day epigones. Above all, as some of the Brookings Institution panelists noted sheepishly, the Democrats’ agenda omits any mention of the issue that dominates all others and is responsible for the electoral rout of the Republicans that returned Congress to Democratic control: the war in Iraq.

As the panelists dutifully discussed and debated the “100 Hours” agenda, they occasionally alluded to the war, evaded with the duplicity and cowardice that have become the hallmarks of the Democratic Party, as the “800-pound gorilla” looming in the background.

The moderator was Thomas E. Mann, the Averell Harriman chair and senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. He is the co-author of a recently published book on Congress called *The Broken Branch*.

On the panel was Alice M. Rivlin, a senior fellow in the economic studies program at the institution. She held leading economic positions in the Clinton administration, serving as director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, after which she was vice chair of the Federal Reserve Board (1996-99).

Panelist Lois Dickson Rice is a guest scholar in the Economics Studies Program at Brookings and has long been associated with the Pell Grant program and other federal aid programs for low-income college students.

The third panelist was Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow for political transitions in the Middle East and South Asia at the Saban Center in the Brookings Institution. A recently retired veteran of 30 years in the CIA, he served as a senior advisor at the National Security

Council to the last three presidents.

Rivlin, of the three panelists, revealed most openly the right-wing essence, behind the pseudo-reformist rhetoric of Democratic leaders, of the party's orientation. She began by bemoaning the decision of Pelosi to begin the new Congress by limiting debate on the Democrats' initial agenda, which she characterized as "modest."

The Democratic leadership was "passing up an opportunity to practice working with the Republicans," she lamented. Reflecting the insularity of a liberal elite which takes its cue from the corporate media, she worried that "the last few days the news stories have been about the Democrats' partisanship." She went on to characterize the November elections, which resoundingly repudiated the Iraq war, the Republican Congress and the Bush administration, as a "rejection of the politics of finger-pointing and excessive partisanship."

Rivlin had no problem deflating the pretensions of the Democrats' social reform agenda, calling their proposed minimum wage increase "mostly symbolic" and their talk of reducing tax breaks for big oil "of symbolic value." The Democrats' "serious agenda," she said, was their proposal to reestablish the "pay-as-you-go" budget rules that prevailed during the Clinton administration.

This return to fiscal austerity, she implied, was the real thing, while the rest was mostly window dressing. Given the need to slash the budget deficit, it would "not be easy" to "figure out how to pay for things." She said nothing of the massive tax cuts for the rich enacted under Bush, which the Democratic leaders have signaled they will not touch.

Of the three panelists, Bruce Riedel was the only one to directly address the war in Iraq. He presented a grim picture of the US position and a jaundiced view of Bush's impending announcement of an escalation. He lamented Bush's dismissal of the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report, which, he said, laid out a bipartisan approach that "addressed what the American people were saying in the November election."

He called the plans to deploy tens of thousands of additional troops a "particularly risky strategy," whose "chances of success were not guaranteed" and whose "chances of failure were high."

He predicted a "major clash" with the Democrats, but

then asked, "What can Congress do?" It could cut off funding, he suggested. "Congress did that in 1975 under Ford, but it's not likely to happen" today.

He concluded, "The question in 2007-2008 will be: Who lost Iraq?"

When a member of the audience, who identified himself as a representative of Russian television, asked what the chances were of Bush being impeached, the three panelists and the moderator agreed they were remote. "Everybody thinks it would be a disaster," said Rivlin.

This reporter asked the panel: "What do you think are the political and constitutional implications and consequences of a president ignoring an election that repudiated his war policy, and instead escalating the war, and a Democratic Congress that seeks to evade the issue?"

A hush settled over the room. Riedel answered: "A very good question. If the president goes forward with an escalating strategy, and particularly if it does not show quick gains, we will see Democrats and some Republicans move to a harsh posture. Demonstrations against the war will begin to take on a much larger character. There will be mass demonstrations in Washington and other cities. It will look like the worst periods of the Nixon presidency, with the president under siege."



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